



# Competition in Benevolence

## CIVIL WAR SOLDIERS' AID IN IOWA

by Noah Zaring

**T**he American Civil War is often cited as the first "modern" war, but advances in strategy and weaponry were not matched by similar advances in support services. Soldiers were poorly equipped, poorly fed, and—if they fell ill or were wounded—poorly cared for. To compensate for what the armies either could not or would not supply, Americans set up organizations to supply food, medical supplies, and care to soldiers.

Iowa was no exception. With their soldiers in the battlefield, the citizens of Iowa set out to support the

combatants as best they could with supplies from home. Following a nationwide trend, aid societies and sanitary commissions were quickly set up in cities and towns across the state.

What is remarkable about the situation in Iowa, though, is that there came to be competition in this work of benevolence. Two groups appeared and soon were at odds, competing for constituents and denouncing each other. Further complicating matters was the issue of gender difference, one group having been founded and run by women, the other by men.



For three years the two ran separately, each vying to be the premier relief organization in the state and refusing to compromise and unite their efforts.

These clashes provide a way to examine gender issues at the time of the Civil War. Why did women refuse to acquiesce to the pressures brought on them by men working in relief? And how did women view themselves with regard to this conflict?

The concept of a civilian association providing aid to armies in the field was not new at the time of the Civil War. Such organizations had existed previously in the 19th century (most famous is Florence Nightingale's work in conjunction with the British army in the Crimea), but they were not widely accepted by governments and military officers. During the American Civil War, these organizations were important in aiding the troops, and were widely supported by civilians wanting to help the war effort. Much of this support came from women, who, barred from participating in the fighting itself, devoted considerable effort to sending supplies or working behind the lines as nurses or as "agents" who ensured that soldiers were provided for.

The impetus for these relief organizations was the terrible conditions in camps and field hospitals. The Union army did little to care for the health and welfare of its troops. Inductees, often already in poor health, were sent to camps notable for their piles of trash and decomposing food, horse manure, and open latrines. Equipment was terrible, and soldiers suffered due to inadequate clothing, bedding, and tents. Provisions were equally bad. At best soldiers would get salt pork, hardtack, bread, and beans, often so over-cooked that they lacked nutritional value. Fresh water was practically nonexistent.

Malnourished and exhausted by the rigors of army life, soldiers fell prey to disease in huge numbers. Measles, mumps, and other childhood diseases swept through newly formed regiments, especially those recruited from isolated areas where people had not been exposed to these ailments.

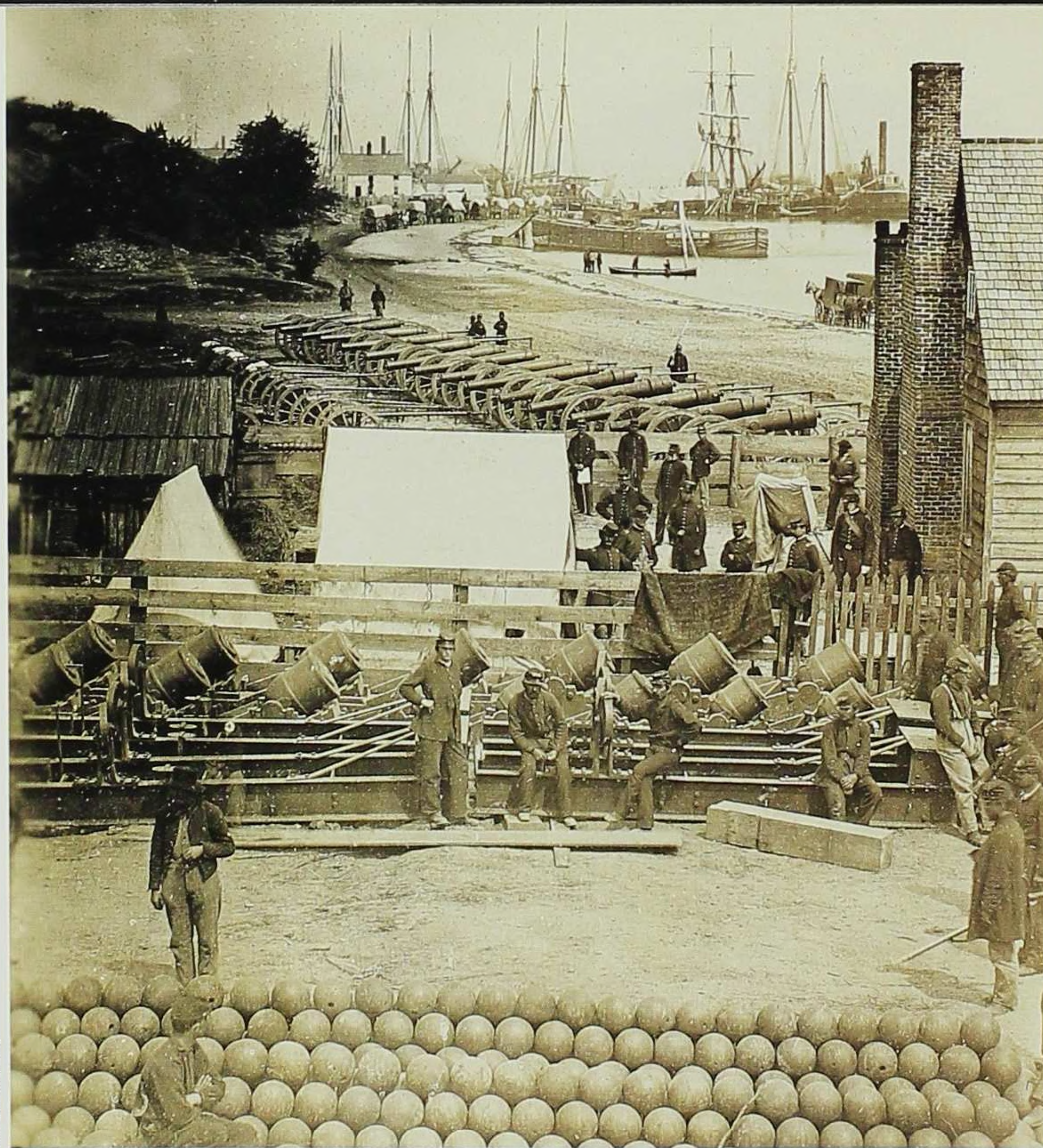
**"I took cold and the mumps settled on me,"** Melvin James Briggs writes to Volney Briggs, in Mechanicsville, Iowa, May 1864. Disease was the other enemy in the Civil War, and Briggs writes of 200 soldiers sick with "agood many other diseases." He died of chronic diarrhea in a Georgia hospital that August. SHSI (IOWA CITY)

Malnutrition, fetid water, and crowded and foul conditions in camps led to outbreaks of dysentery, diarrhea, and typhoid fever. Northern troops going south faced the additional threats of dengue fever, yellow fever, and malaria. The Union army reported more than 6,000,000 cases of disease during the course of the war, and nearly 196,000 deaths from disease, accounting for about two thirds of their total fatalities. During the first year, one third of the Union army went on sick call, and during the course of the war, 99.5 percent of Union soldiers reported suffering from dysentery or diarrhea.

The grim toll of camp disease was paired with dreadful conditions in army hospitals. The Civil War was the first major conflict to make use of two new

When Wednesday May 18<sup>th</sup> 1864  
I am at the hospital i took  
cold and the mumps settled  
on me i am well now  
i fair well here i have dood  
bead i am in a tent the  
boat i came upon  
there was to hundred  
sick soldiers with the  
small pox meayels mumps  
earciplous tifoid feaver  
and agood many other  
deseases I will send some  
more scab of my arm  
I was vaxinated in to  
places I may stay here  
three weeks there are three  
of our boys here My love  
to you all Direct your letter  
to new albany hospital no 6  
ward 4 write soon





**Orderly stacks of cannonballs and rows of cannons belie the destruction they would cause on the battlefields. The cone-shaped Minié bullets also did incredible harm, expanding on impact and ripping through flesh and bone.**

military inventions: the rifled musket, which was far more accurate than the smoothbore guns used previously, and the soft-lead Minié bullet. These cone-shaped Minié balls expanded on impact, ripping through flesh and bone in a way that harder round shot did not. Minié balls were also notorious for dragging bits of uniform and dirt into wounds, thus increasing the likelihood of infection.

Attempting to meet the challenge of these twin evils was an army with medical capabilities that were, in the opinion of one historian, "below those of Imperial Rome." At the start of the war, the Union army had only about a hundred doctors, no general hospital or field hospitals, no hospital corps, and no ambulance corps. Doctors were recruited by each state for their own troops, and they ranged from highly skilled surgeons to the inexperienced, the untrained, and, in many cases, the alcoholic. Surgeons at the time had little or no knowledge of basic sanitation. Hospitals were dirty and crowded, operations were performed with unwashed instruments, and wounds bound with reused dressings. Infections were rampant and

wounds became gangrenous with disturbing regularity. The most common treatment for this was repeated amputations until the infection had stopped spreading. Survival rates for musket wounds were directly proportional to the distance of the wound from the center of the body. Mortality rates were 26 percent for amputees, 60 percent for wounds to the chest, 87 percent for wounds to the abdomen, and 100 percent if the small intestine was punctured.

As the war progressed the Union army did improve conditions for its troops, but the greatest alleviation of these terrible conditions came from the various volunteer aid commissions that sprang up across the nation. In the North, three major organizations coordinated relief work nationwide. Of these, the largest was the United States Sanitary Commission (U.S.S.C.), es-

tablished in June 1861 by a group of male physicians on behalf of the New York City-based Women's Central Association of Relief. Operating initially in the East and later nationwide, the U.S.S.C. worked to ensure that camps and hospitals were in good condition, collected and distributed food and supplies among the troops, and provided extra care to wounded and ailing soldiers. The Western Sanitary Commission, founded in Missouri in the autumn of 1861, had a similar mission but focused initially on the armies along the Mississippi, which it considered neglected by the East Coast-based U.S.S.C. Finally, there was the United States Christian Commission, a group founded early in the war by the Y.M.C.A., but not fully developed until about 1863. It combined the collection and distribution of goods with the spreading of Christian doctrine and religious tracts.

In Iowa the first large-scale charitable response to the war was under the auspices of the Keokuk Soldiers' Aid Society. Located in the southeast corner of the state, near the juncture of the Des Moines and Mississippi Rivers, Keokuk was a major staging point for



Iowa troops going off to war and was the site of a military hospital for wounded soldiers evacuated from downriver. The women of the city founded the Keokuk Soldiers' Aid Society early in the war. By virtue of their proximity to the fighting, they were able to send their corresponding secretary, Annie Turner Wittenmyer, the 33-year-old widow of a wealthy Keokuk merchant, to survey the conditions of Iowa regiments fighting along the Mississippi. She made her first trip in April 1861, and sent back reports that the soldiers were in little need of the rolled bandages and lint (the soft, fleecy material made from linen and used for poultices and dressings) being sent by Iowa charities, but rather required pillows, sheets, ticking for straw mattresses, and dried fruit to supplement army rations. Supplies and food were gathered in Keokuk and nearby towns, and on August 5,

**To the Ladies of Iowa.**

We address you in behalf of the "Soldiers' Aid Society" of this city, and invite you to organize in your respective districts and co-operate with us in providing the Iowa volunteers, and especially in furnishing their hospitals with such comforts and conveniences as the Government does not provide.

As our society will be in direct communication with the troops, they will, through their Secretary, transmit to you from time to time such items of intelligence as will advance the interests of your associations.

Bed-shirts, drawers, pillow-cases, sheets and towels are the articles most needed at this time.

All packages sent to the "Soldiers' Aid Society," Keokuk, express pre-paid, will be forwarded to their destination free of charge.

For further information address the Corresponding Secretary.

MRS. J. B. HOWELL, Pres't.

ANNIE WITTENMYER, Cor. Sec'y.

Papers throughout the State please copy.

**Annie Wittenmyer (below) appealed to Iowa women to donate "bed-shirts, drawers, pillow-cases, sheets and towels" through notices published in Iowa newspapers. In response, numerous local aid societies across the state forwarded supplies and food to Wittenmyer and the Keokuk Soldiers' Aid Society.**



DES MOINES VALLEY WHIG (SEPT. 16, 1861), P. 3; PORTRAIT: SHSI (IOWA CITY)

Wittenmyer set off downriver in order to take charge of their distribution.

The Keokuk Soldiers' Aid Society soon broadened its scope and began to act as an outlet for relief organizations statewide. In September 1861, Wittenmyer and society president Mrs. J. B. Howell sent a printed appeal to newspapers across the state urging the women of Iowa to found local relief societies and send boxes of goods to Keokuk for direct distribution to Iowa regiments and hospitals.

These calls seem to have been widely heeded. Many Iowa women were disturbed by accounts of corruption and inefficiency among the nationwide relief organizations, and felt that their state's soldiers would be better served through the direct action of the Keokuk society in the field. As an Iowa City group wrote to the Keokuk women, "We decidedly prefer sending our boxes to Mrs. Wittenmyer's care, if she will allow us, as the confidence of the people here, is very much shaken in the management of the official societies."

Wittenmyer's appeals resulted in a loosely organized coalition of at least 40 local women's organizations across the state held together only by common concerns and the actions of the Keokuk group. Each town coordinated such activities as collecting individual food and money donations, staging small fundraising fairs, knitting clothes, and growing food for the troops on plots of land set aside for the war effort. The money and goods collected were sent to Keokuk and then forwarded to Wittenmyer by Partridge and Co., a St. Louis shipping agent working free of charge. Wittenmyer traveled between the Iowa regiments and hospitals and distributed the goods in whatever way she saw fit.

In October 1861, a second statewide aid group appeared. Concerned by the lack of a clearly arranged and centrally unified soldiers' aid organization, Governor Samuel Kirkwood consulted a prominent Methodist minister, Rev. Alpha Jefferson Kynett of Lyons in Clinton County. Upon Kynett's advice, the governor appointed several respected Iowa men to serve in an "Army Sanitary Commission for the State of Iowa," commonly known as the State Sanitary Commission. Kynett served as corresponding secretary and general agent. The organization was modeled after the United States Sanitary Commission, but was intended to work solely with Iowans, collecting money and supplies raised by local aid societies in the state and distributing them to Iowa troops. Notably, women



were only to participate in this new organization at the local level, and none of the women already working for the relief of Iowa soldiers were consulted in forming the new group or asked to help run it.

Later that month, Kynett adopted Wittenmyer's technique and sent an "Appeal to the Women of Iowa" to newspapers across the state. Pointedly ignoring the work already done in the state, Kynett gave an account of the soldiers' lack of goods and nursing, and declared that until now, women had been unable to aid Iowans in the field due to the inactivity of the U.S. Sanitary Commission in the West. The appeal proclaimed, "You will be gratified to learn that the lack of service above referred to, on the part of the United States Army Sanitary Commission, has been supplied by the appointment of the Army Sanitary Commission of the State of Iowa." Kynett went on to suggest that every town organize a society to be directly affiliated with the new State Sanitary Commission, furnishing this commission with monthly reports, funds, and goods. No mention was made of any existing soldiers' aid activities in Iowa or of the actions of the Keokuk society.

**F**ar from uniting and homogenizing relief efforts in Iowa as Governor Kirkwood had hoped, the entrance of this new organization threw them into turmoil. The first harbinger of disunity was a front-page editorial in the *Keokuk Weekly Gate City* on November 1, 1861. It lauded the work of the various women's groups across Iowa and added, acidly, "All at once, many months after the Iowa First had fought, bled and died, and several weeks after the Ladies' Aid Association had furnished valuable information to the public and stores of necessary articles to the hospitals, an idea seems to have struck our State authorities. This thing must be stopped; there is a great deal of glory running to waste in this matter, and we must make haste to bottle it up for distribution amongst our HONORABLES. Besides, there is a chance for salaries and fees in carrying out this benevolent measure."

The *Gate City* then attacked the qualifications of the members of the State Sanitary Commission. It noted that, in contrast to the United States Sanitary Commission, no medical doctors had been appointed as members. Further, the editorial implied that the "two Bishops, two or three Reverends, three or four

Honorables and three or four Bankers" who had been appointed would do little work themselves, and that they were as likely to harm relief work in Iowa as to help it. "The women of Iowa," declared the *Gate City*, "would do this thing up much better without them."

The article was not entirely correct; the surgeon-general of Iowa, an M.D., was president of the new commission, and besides, the State Sanitary Commission was intended to only distribute supplies, not provide direct medical aid. It did not need doctors on its board in the way in which the national commission did. Furthermore, the publisher of the *Gate City* was married to the president of the Keokuk Soldiers' Aid Society, and was perhaps not an impartial observer. Nonetheless, the editorial's strong opinions reflected the anger many women felt. Wittenmyer's Keokuk Society refused to subject itself to the authority of the state-appointed commission, and many of the independent women's groups in the state followed its lead.

In November 1861, Wittenmyer sent out another appeal through Iowa newspapers, reporting that "there has been great distress among our troops on account of sickness, and . . . a lack of hospital stores and comforts has aggravated their sufferings." She lauded the work women had already performed, saying "the ladies of our state have done nobly—let us continue our efforts—much still is to be done."

Wittenmyer also launched into open criticism of the new rival group. "Another very serious difficulty that our sick soldiers have to contend with," she declared, is "the impracticable plans of the Sanitary Commission." She lambasted its scheme to organize a large hospital in St. Louis for Iowa soldiers, claiming that "while large sums of money are being expended in St. Louis for hospital purposes, the regiment hospitals [in the field] are grossly neglected." Further, she wrote that many of the injured soldiers required medical help as quickly as possible, and that sending them on a trip to this distant hospital might kill them.

Tensions ran high. In March 1862, the secretary of the Keokuk society, Lucretia Knowles, wrote to Wittenmyer, relaying accounts of circulars being sent out by the Sanitary Commission, and of a certain chaplain plying a member of the Keokuk group for "a list of the societies that we correspond with & obtained supplies from." "Of course he did not obtain it," she added. "He is in the interest of the San. Com." Other societies also were pressured. Amelia Bloomer, a longtime campaigner for women's rights then living in Council Bluffs, later wrote Wittenmyer about circulars and letters received from the secretary of the



expressly for that purpose. They say the sick are  
very well cared for on these boats too.

I saw Mrs Annie Whitenmyer the other  
day. She has charge of Sanitary Stores for Iowa  
troops. She looks like a very nice woman.

She has supplied most all the Iowa Regts with  
different articles. I went down with one of our  
surgeons the other day - We went all through  
the boat and look over the different things

almost every thing you could think of for a sick  
man or a well one. but there has been very  
little come in our Regt up to the present time.

Mrs Whitenmyer has two boats for her own use.  
When Mr. Lovelace gets home he can tell you a great

SHS (IOWA CITY)

"I saw Mrs Annie Whitenmyer the other day," John Walter Lee writes in a portion of a letter to his father from Camp Millikens Bend, Louisiana, 1863. "She has supplied most all the Iowa Regts with different articles" and "has two boats for her own use." Another soldier noted that Wittenmyer "takes very minute observation of things about camp."

Sanitary Commission cajoling her to affiliate with it. Apparently he had promised that through his organization aid would be better applied and donors would receive more recognition.

Wittenmyer's group clearly had its adherents. As Bloomer reported, "Mrs. Deming urged [sending money to Keokuk], saying she had every confidence in you and none in the President of the State Commission." Nonetheless, competition was hurting. In the spring of 1862, the Keokuk society was in dire straits. On March 4, just one month before the battle of Shiloh, secretary Knowles warned Wittenmyer that "unless some way of raising more [money] can be devised it will be out of our power to keep an agent in the field." In desperation she urged Wittenmyer to attack the Sanitary Commission directly. "Is it not possible to ascertain what the Sanitary Commission is doing? . . . If they are doing nothing why can we not make it public? If we can show that our society is doing the work of the Commission, then we can come out and ask for aid from other societies."

Indeed, two days earlier Wittenmyer had written to Governor Kirkwood claiming that "the State San'y Commission are accomplishing nothing. . . . Not one dollar[']s worth of goods committed to their care have reached the Iowa troops." In April the Keokuk society made some of these charges publicly, alleging in the

Keokuk Gate City that "great quantities of stores from the Iowa State Sanitary Commission . . . were lying unused and uncalled for [in St. Louis], for a great length of time, when our troops at distant Posts were in daily need of them."

**S**tung by these allegations, the State Sanitary Commission organized a statewide convention of local aid societies in Davenport that May in order to boost support for itself. The delegates elected a few prominent men to lead the convention, passed a resolution praising the State Sanitary Commission, and suggested that local aid societies "assist and facilitate its operation."

During the convention, Kynett reported that his organization had received \$589.66 in cash donations and \$18,600 in supplies that had been distributed among the troops. Noting the hostility towards his group in the state, he acknowledged that various city-organized relief groups had done good work, but claimed that they "labored under disadvantages to which they would not have been subjected, had they operated" under the auspices of the State Sanitary Commission. Apparently the convention had no last-





LETTER: ANNIE TURNER WITTEMYER PAPERS, PHOTO: SHS (DES MOINES)

Unidentified soldiers wait for orders. Right: A surgeon with the 4th Iowa Regiment requests "Linnen and Cotton rags, for bandages and dressing" and "Wine, Brandy, Preserves, Fruits Vegetables and Jellies, as much as you have to Spare, as it will be difficult for us to obtain them from any other source." List dated 1861, from Rolla, Missouri.

Rolla Mo Dec 19<sup>th</sup> 1861

List of articles necessary for the Hospital  
4<sup>th</sup> Regt Iowa Vol

Bedsacks. N<sup>o</sup> 20. 3 1/2 7 feet  
Sheets " " " "  
Pillows <sup>larger than</sup> " " " " 13<sup>1/2</sup>  
Woolen Blankets and Quilts, N<sup>o</sup> 40  
Linnen and Cotton rags, for bandages  
and dressing. blisters, wounds, etc.—  
Wine Brandy Preserves, Fruits  
Vegetables and jellies, as much as you have  
to Spare, as it will be difficult for us  
to obtain them from any other source—

W. W. Robbins  
Surgeon 4<sup>th</sup> Reg Iowa Vol



ing influence upon relief work in the state; it was sparsely attended and the *Muscatine Journal* called it "a very lame affair."

But the ensuing confusion did have an effect, largely negative, on relations between sanitary groups. In her letters to Wittenmyer, Bloomer gave an account of the Council Bluffs organization's decision to form a new group connected to the State Sanitary Commission. This was done at a meeting presided over by Judge Caleb Baldwin, an honorary member of the State Sanitary Commission. Bloomer wrote, "There were no statements or discussion, the ladies kept still and voted as directed. . . . I found after the meeting adjourned that many of the ladies supposed it all the same as the other society, and considered the funds etc. in the Soldier's Aid Society as belonging to the new society." Other members of the Council Bluffs Society were under the impression that the Keokuk Soldiers' Aid Society had already merged with the State Sanitary Commission, and so considered the whole issue moot.

Complicating the situation further was a law passed by the Iowa General Assembly in a special session, authorizing Governor Kirkwood to appoint and fund at least two state sanitary agents. These agents were to secure transportation and supplies for convalescing Iowa soldiers. One of them, the law specifically stated, was to be Annie Wittenmyer. While this new position did not really change Wittenmyer's actions in the field, it did give her some official standing, which would prove useful in later clashes with rivals. It also allotted her a monthly salary of \$100 and provided funds for her transportation. Before this she had worked gratis and relied upon transport being provided free.

The situation as it was developing does not seem to have worked for either organization. As Wittenmyer herself pointed out, although the State Sanitary Commission was government funded, the ladies' aid societies had more popular support across the state. Wittenmyer called for a convention in Davenport in July 1862 to see if the two groups could cooperate. Delegates from both the ladies' aid societies and the State Sanitary Commission attended, and seem to have come to an amicable agreement. The groups promised not to oppose each other, and correspondence between the two would be maintained by Lucretia Knowles of Keokuk and A. J. Kynett. It was announced publicly that the organizations had united their efforts and would no longer compete.

Wittenmyer seemed pleased with the new situation; in a letter to the governor later that July, she

promised, "We will all get along harmoniously together." Nevertheless, the two groups did not coordinate their actions very well over the next year.

**B**y 1863 the nature of the war had changed, requiring revised methods of sanitary-goods distribution. Iowa soldiers fighting in the West were spread out over a greater area, and farther from Iowa than before. Successful distribution of goods by one or two specific agents was increasingly impractical. Kynett's State Sanitary Commission attempted to solve this problem by officially affiliating with the nationwide United States Sanitary Commission, whose new distribution center in Chicago now served soldiers in the West. Wittenmyer's group also recognized the need for change. When it could not distribute supplies itself, it sent them to the Western Sanitary Commission, which focused on western states only and thus was more likely to deliver Iowa goods to Iowa troops.

Aware of the need to reorganize distribution, Wittenmyer called for local aid groups across Iowa to convene in Muscatine on October 7, 1863. The meeting was attended by more than 200 people, and was run entirely by women. On Wittenmyer's advice, the convention reworked the ad-hoc confederation of ladies' aid societies affiliated with the Keokuk group into the Iowa State Sanitary Organization, a woman-run association with Wittenmyer as president. The new organization was centrally organized under a single name and with clear leadership, thus countering the accusations of disorganization that had been leveled against the women's groups.

Rev. Kynett was present at the meeting, and on the second day a motion was made that he be allowed to address the body. Tension was evident. The chronicler of the convention remarked that "personal allusions [were] made." After heated debate, the motion was defeated, but Wittenmyer made a personal appeal that Kynett be allowed to speak and permission was granted. Kynett talked of the history and authority of his group, and urged that the new Iowa State Sanitary Organization should become a part of his State Sanitary Commission and affiliate with the nationwide U.S.S.C.

Then Wittenmyer took the floor. She declared that her organization had been established first, and that she had been appointed a state agent by a legislative bill, while Kynett and the State Sanitary Commission derived their authority only through their appoint-



Wednesday Oct. 7<sup>th</sup> I went to Muscatine to Mrs. Wittenmyer's Convention. Found it well packed and at her Command! Rev. Mr. Baird and Gov. Kirkwood spoke at night. Thursday Oct. 8<sup>th</sup> I started to come home at 2 o'clock but some ladies from Washington requested me to stay, which I did. They introduced a resolution asking me to address the Convention, but this was not in the programme and the Convention voted it down. I however asked and obtained leave to make a personal explanation which I did. Out from Feminine Conventions "Good Lord deliver me."

DIARY FROM A. J. KYNETT PAPERS, CORNELL COLLEGE ARCHIVES

**D**iary entries by Rev. A. J. Kynett (right) on October 7 and 8: "I went to Muscatine to Mrs. Wittenmyer's convention. Found it well packed and at her Command." The minister concludes on the second day: "From Feminine Conventions Good Lord deliver me."



STANDARD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE ALCOHOL PROBLEM (1928)

ment by the governor, so therefore she held the law on her side. She appealed to Kynett "in the name of God and humanity, to lay aside all personal feelings and unite in a State Organization that would consolidate [their] sanitary interests." Kynett refused, citing his ties to the U.S.S.C. He is not further mentioned in the convention proceedings. Showing clearly its allegiances, the convention commended Wittenmyer for her work.

The new Iowa State Sanitary Organization created at the convention declined to affiliate with any larger society, but continued to distribute goods in the field through Wittenmyer's efforts, using the Western Sanitary Commission only when necessary. While the actual work was changed little, if at all, by the founding of the new organization, the creation of the State Sanitary Organization was significant in that it marked a major change in how the women's groups addressed

the task of soldiers' aid. The new group was challenging the State Sanitary Commission on its own ground. No longer could the State Sanitary Commission portray itself as the "official" Iowa body, trying to bring structure and unity to the disparate local aid societies. Now there were two groups, equally official and businesslike, vying to be the premier relief group in Iowa.

In an editorial on the founding of the new organization, the *Muscatine Weekly Journal* declared, "Matters are becoming somewhat complicated in this State in regard to sanitary [issues]. . . . This is an unfortunate state of affairs as the inharmonious action of several organizations tends to alienate the sympathies of the people from the good cause which all have in view." Iowans contributing supplies were increasingly confused and discouraged by the continuous squabbling. In hospitals and camps the accounts of grateful recipients of Iowa's donations were matched by stories of imperfect distribution of supplies, poor accounting of goods, and of packages sent but never received. Even Governor Kirkwood admitted that he was "almost disheartened in regard to sanitary affairs. There seems to be so much jealousy and ill will among those engaged in the matter that it discourages me and will I fear discourage those who have been contributing so liberally for this purpose."

The situation could no longer continue without seriously undermining the help Iowa could give to its soldiers. Recognizing this, 65 prominent women from across the state, supported by an additional 68 notable men, sent out an appeal to "the 'Soldiers' Aid Societies,' Societies under the Auspices of the 'Iowa Sanitary Commission,' 'Loyal Leagues,' and 'Soldiers' Christian Commission,' and all other Aid Societies in the State of Iowa" to convene in Des Moines on November 18, 1863. Attended by delegates of most major state



groups, including Wittenmyer and Kynett, this convention seems to have been the definitive forum in which a new arrangement would be established. The delegates were to "devise the necessary means to secure harmony between the various organizations . . . of the State so as to crown our mutual efforts with a higher degree of success."

The convention was also clearly a final showdown between the Wittenmyer and Kynett factions, whose opposition had grown extremely bitter. One correspondent regretted that unbiased delegates could not be found and warned Wittenmyer that of those attending from her society "in but one of the four will you find a person unprejudiced against you." Another told Wittenmyer of her own plight, saying she had become "decidedly unpopular with your enemies in our society because I would take every opportunity to defend you." The *Muscatine Weekly Journal* reported that the Wittenmyer faction was in the minority.

Much of the personal enmity and many of the allegations of misdeeds leveled against Wittenmyer during the course of the war came from Ann Harlan, wife of Iowa's U.S. senator James Harlan. Ann Harlan was a functionary in relief works in Iowa and a bitter opponent of Wittenmyer. She seems to have considered the Des Moines convention her opportunity to get rid of Wittenmyer, and lent her considerable social clout to promoting the event and packing it with as many Wittenmyer opponents as possible. Addressing the assembly on its first day, Governor-Elect William Stone, Kirkwood's successor, underscored the factionalism in the convention by refusing to declare himself "Wittenmyer or Anti-Wittenmyer."

**T**he first day of the convention began amicably enough. It was devoted to organizing the assembly, electing leaders, and hearing speeches from prominent delegates, including James Harlan, Stone, Wittenmyer, and Kynett. Women held most of the principal seats, including president and secretary.

The foundations were laid for a new, unified organization—the "Iowa Sanitary Commission." A Davenport judge was elected president, six women were elected vice-presidents, and a man and a woman (Lucretia Knowles of Keokuk) were elected secretaries. A new committee comprising a male and a female member from each Iowa congressional district and three additional female at-large members was estab-

lished to draw up its constitution and by-laws.

Neither Wittenmyer nor Kynett held official positions in this new commission, though they were clearly two of the most important delegates. A very positive air prevailed, at least initially, and the reporter from the *Daily State Register* decided "all ordinary obstacles could be surmounted by the united efforts of the ladies of the Haweye [sic] State."

On day two, this harmony was gone. The first signal came during the reading of the minutes of the previous day. A motion was made, presumably by a Wittenmyer adherent, to strike the word "detailed" as descriptive of Kynett's report to the convention the day before. This motion was tabled, and the next motion was that both Kynett and Wittenmyer should report the expenditures of their groups, complete with vouchers. Both had come prepared with reports, but only Kynett was able to produce vouchers.

Thinly veiled allegations of misdeeds were raised against Wittenmyer, which were compounded by lingering accusations made before the conference that she had sold some of her supplies. Frustrated, Wittenmyer responded that she was fully willing to have her books audited, but that her records were too voluminous to bring to the conference. Kynett pressed further: "If her business was extensive, so much was the necessity for a detailed report and vouchers." To this Wittenmyer answered that at previous conventions she had not been questioned about vouchers, and declared that "a trap had been laid in this Convention." She was quickly chastised by Senator Harlan, president of the meeting, for questioning the convention's integrity.

The matter was dropped, allowing Wittenmyer's supporters to launch a counterattack. A Dr. Shaw took the floor and alleged that the women's convention was being unjustly dominated by men, clearly directing this charge at Kynett's group. He implied that the Army Sanitary Commission was wasteful, and then praised Wittenmyer for her devotion to duty. Shaw was followed by a Mrs. Darwin, chastising those who felt that relief work should be run by men, and exalting Wittenmyer: "There is one name . . . we will ever cherish in our heart of hearts—a name deeply engraved on many a suffering soldier's memory; embalmed with many a thankful tear; a name that shall become a household word in many a bereaved dwelling, a name whose laurels shall be green when others now verdant with pale honors shall be forgotten; a name which every true woman delights to honor; a name that shall ever live in the heart of a grateful State—the name of ANNIE WITTENMYER!" "At the



close of Mrs. Darwin's remarks," noted the *Register*, "the House manifested its approval by long continual applause."

Thus ended the fighting between the two groups. The convention spent the rest of its time forming the new, united organization. The only divisive issue raised was with which national organization to affiliate: the U.S.S.C. or the Western States Sanitary Commission. Affiliation with only the U.S.S.C. was soundly defeated (a victory for Wittenmyer's group), and it was agreed that the new Iowa Sanitary Commission would divide its goods between both organizations as it saw fit.

The final membership of the new commission, comprising a nearly equal number of men and women, also reflects this spirit of compromise. The *Register* judged that "the sympathy of the Convention and of the spectators was manifestly with Mrs. W.," quite a change from the hostility towards her reported at the beginning of the meeting. Further, it declared, "The Convention accomplished great good in the development of . . . the Sanitary affairs of the State."

The days of division in Iowa sanitary affairs were over. The Iowa Sanitary Commission held its first meeting in December 1863. Kynett handed over the accounts of his group and Wittenmyer sent a letter transferring the authority of her organization and all existing operations to the new commission. Wittenmyer retained her position as a state sanitary agent and kept working in the field.

In February 1864, the Iowa legislature tried to revoke the bill that had created Wittenmyer's position, but an outpouring of popular support forced her political enemies to table the bill indefinitely. In June of that year she resigned her position and joined the United States Christian Commission in order to carry out a plan of her own design for special dietary hospitals for wounded soldiers. After the war, Wittenmyer refocused her energies on prohibition, becoming the first national president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (W.C.T.U.). The evils of alcohol were a cause in which her former adversary, A. J. Kynett, also distinguished himself later in life: he helped found the Anti-Saloon League of America.

It is tempting to look at the three-year conflict between the ladies' aid societies and the State Sanitary Commission as an issue of women's rights. One might argue that Wittenmyer and her group were taking advantage of the turmoil of war to push towards equality with men and beyond the constraints of the domestic sphere. There is some truth to this, but the reality is more complex. Questions of what were appropriate actions for women were important. These Iowa women were certainly asserting themselves beyond what they would, and perhaps could, have done before the war. However, Wittenmyer and her colleagues viewed their work as an extension of their role as care givers

in the home and in society, and challenged any male intrusion. They opposed the male-dominated organization only because they considered it poorly conceived, inefficiently run, and insufficiently substituting for the work that women were perfectly justified in doing.

The women of Iowa viewed sanitary affairs as a field to which their gender was uniquely suited. In her November 1861 appeal to

A typical list of donations received from a local soldiers' aid society, this one is from Clermont, Iowa, 1862. The women sent supplies ranging from "14 rolls bandages" to "9 packages dried fruit." List after list of items donated by Iowa communities of all sizes attest to the outpouring of aid for soldiers.

ANNIE TURNER WITTENMYER PAPERS, SHSI (DES MOINES)

From aid society Clermont Fayette Co Iowa

9 Comfortables	1 pkg tract papers & magazines
14 pairs socks	1 Book
12 Canton flannel shirts	3 pin Cushions
9 Cotton do	1 Sponge
2 pillows	2 lbs Soap
12 pillow cases	4 lbs butter
7 Cushions	9 packages dried fruit
13 sheets	1 Tapioca
12 towels	1 Sago
3 bundles compresses	3 Cans jelly
14 rolls bandages	





COURTESY OF FAIRFIELD PUBLIC LIBRARY MUSEUM

**C**lustered around baskets of apples, the Ladies Sanitary Aid Society of Fairfield prepare supplies at the home of Mehitable Woods, here resting her elbow on a cider press. Woods traveled south as a sanitary commission agent, nursing soldiers and delivering supplies. On her last trip in 1864 she delivered 37 tons of supplies. Such candid photos of women engaged in Civil War soldiers' aid projects are rare; this one is dated 1863.

Iowa women, Wittenmyer wrote: "Women, weak and dependent as they are, are the most efficient agents for doing good either as nurses or visitors among our hospitals. They are received with a degree of confidence and cordiality that no man, however great his military or medical reputation, can command, and with womanly hearts and womanly tact, they can lay hold of influences that men cannot reach." She and her colleagues did not perceive their positions as jobs, and thus as challenges to what would rightfully be a man's place, but instead as their duty as women to bring comfort to their sons, husbands, and brothers. Indeed, in her memoirs of the war Wittenmyer disapprovingly tells of a woman fighting in the guise of a man, and thereby not filling her proper role.

Though gender issues were not foremost in the minds of these Iowa women, the almost unprecedented situation of women operating such a large-scale organization did bring about questions of propriety. Most of the questions centered on nurses and sanitary agents working in hospitals and frequently very near battle lines. These debates focused on pos-

sible dangers to the women, resentment of their authority by army surgeons and administrators, and the appropriateness of having young women and men interacting to the extent a hospital would require.

The issue of whether men or women should ultimately have control within sanitary groups, however, does not seem to have come up outside Iowa. And in no other situation was there such contentious debate between groups cut so clearly. While such a large-scale public undertaking as the Keokuk Soldiers' Aid Society was undoubtedly brought on by the tumult of wartime, women had been progressively carving a place for themselves in the public sphere throughout the 19th century. Nationwide, women were becoming steadily more involved in religious groups and public welfare organizations; taking on education for immigrants, women, and the poor; and establishing orphanages and hospitals. In the 1850s Wittenmyer herself had helped found a free school for Keokuk children and a Methodist Sunday school. These earlier public works by women laid the groundwork for the Civil War undertakings, both by making society recep-





**S**ome years after the war, 12 members of the "Iowa City Soldiers Aid Society of the Civil War" posed for this picture. In 1862 the group of about 52 women sent supplies out of state and to Camp Pope in Iowa City. That September they recorded: "The new call from Secretary of War for Lint gave a new impulse, and the company all engaged in picking or scraping it." Scraped from linen, soft and absorbent lint was often applied wet to wounds. Yet even if scraped from clean cloth, it wasn't aseptic.

tive to women doing work outside the home, and by giving women the confidence, experience, and skills for the huge task of soldiers' aid.

Within the arena of sanitary affairs, Iowa women did consider themselves equal, and perhaps superior to men. When questions of whether a male- or female-operated organization would be preferable came up at the various conventions, the women strongly held their ground against male intrusion. In Muscatine, Wittenmyer claimed outright that she had higher authority in the matter of relief work than her male opponent due to her appointment by the legislature. At the Des Moines convention, female delegates objected when men dominated the discussion, and, in forming the new organization, these delegates made sure that women would outnumber men on the committee writing its constitution. In her speech praising Annie Wittenmyer, Mrs. Darwin had asked, "If your house is on fire, your children in danger of perishing in the flames, do you stop to ask whether a man's or a

woman's hand passed the bucket of water. . . ? You are at sea! Your ship is foundering! The men, weary and exhausted at the pumps, have sunk down to rest! If a woman steps to the handle, do you cry 'Hold! It is not proper, not lady-like to be thus engaged on this public ship? Thus it is with us."

Iowa women were not only active in relief work, they were determined to run it. They viewed the attempt by the state government to impose a leadership conceived by men and composed of men as an unjust intrusion into their rightful domain, and they rejected it. As the war continued, however, the Iowa women found themselves forced to adopt standards of efficiency and professionalism more commonly associated with men. For instance, although the Keokuk women refused to join the "official" male-run State Sanitary Commission, they increasingly systematized their own group by strict bookkeeping and accounting for supplies received. In each of their three conventions, the women's groups tried to reform their ad-hoc



structure and incorporate themselves into more official organizations with officers, titles, and clear structures of command. In the final convention in Des Moines, the gender question raised was not the appropriateness of women working outside the home, but rather the effectiveness. Delegates were "to consider whether the LADIES or GENTLEMEN would probably be the more efficient Agents for the shipment of and distribution of goods near the enemy's lines and other exposed positions."

And there was some stirring of more radical ideas as a result of the conflict. Darwin's passionate speech had included the question, "If [men] can leave the peaceful pursuits of the farm or the counting room to engage in fierce strife in the political arena, who shall blame me if I demand a voice in the making of those laws by which I am to be governed?" Also affected by the gender element of the conflict was Amelia Bloomer, who wrote Wittenmyer, "I have gloried in your courage, independence, and ability, and have rejoiced that it is a woman that is doing so much and has gained the confidence of State and National governments."

Though these statements did not reflect the ideas of all women in Iowa, they do point to the importance of the Civil War and of sanitary organizations in women's consciousness. Feminists Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Gage claimed that at the national level the "social and political condition of women was largely changed by our civil war," and that the war "created a revolution in woman herself." Wartime work gave women skills and self-confidence that they carried on into postwar activity. Many involved in relief work went on to positions as teachers or nurses, or to further activism. Moreover, society's view of women as delicate, domestic beings was changed by their wartime achievements.

The experience many Iowa women had with sanitary affairs gave them a taste of public life and a

heightened consciousness of their position in society. These women seem to have developed an understanding of their own abilities and a willingness to challenge the status quo, traits that brought them to the cusp of further activism. Some women backed away from this after the war; others, such as Wittenmyer (in the W.C.T.U.) and Bloomer (who went on to help found the Iowa Equal Suffrage Association), advanced wholeheartedly.

Whether the unusual situation of Civil War relief work in Iowa represents an interesting aberration or a representative microcosm is difficult to determine. The U.S.S.C., Christian Sanitary Commission, and the Western States Commission certainly did compete for constituents much in the way the Iowa groups did, though with less animosity. Nevertheless, the Iowa conflict reveals attitudes towards gender and society in time of war, and testifies to the efforts of Iowans to support their troops. The conflicts and conventions of 1861 to 1863 tell of strong-minded Iowa women rising to the challenge of war, and throwing the established roles of society into turmoil. ❖

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#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Principle sources for this work are the war correspondence in the Annie Turner Wittenmyer Papers (State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines); Iowa newspapers; and Earl Fullbrook's "Relief Work in Iowa During the Civil War" (*Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, 16:2, April 1918). Other sources include Stewart Brooks's *Civil War Medicine* (1966), for hospital and camp conditions; and Mary Ryan's *Cradle of the Middle Class* (1981) and Lori Ginzberg's *Women and the Work of Benevolence* (1990), on the significance of women's charitable work in the 19th century. Readers interested in pursuing this topic further should consult Annie Wittenmyer's Civil War reminiscences, *Under the Guns* (E.B. Stillings, Boston, 1895), and Elizabeth Leonard's *Yankee Women: Gender Battles in the Civil War* (1994). An annotated copy of this article is in the *Iowa Heritage Illustration* production files; the article originated as an undergraduate paper at Grinnell College in 1993.

